Eight year old Martin Richard was cheering loudly for his father as he crossed the finish line of the Boston Marathon. Then the bomb went off that ended his life. His smiling face was gone. Here in the Villages community, we still mourn little Martin’s death, since his grandparents are residents of the Villages.

A nation grieves. A nation worries. Fanatics kill 32 people at the airport and metro station in Brussels. When will the next attack occur? I hear ISIS is looking into drones that will drop dirty bombs. Satan certainly has the power to lead people down the path of evil in ways that leave us stunned and shaken.

Today we celebrate Shepherd Sunday. Our focus is on Jesus our Good Shepherd. No matter what tragedies come to us as a nation or as individuals we are secure in the arms of the Shepherd in this life and for all eternity. The 23rd Psalm assures us, “Goodness and mercy follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” Yes, as Christians, we are: “Safe Forever in the Arms of the Good Shepherd!”

The Revelation to John warns us about problems coming to Christians who are living in the last days. There will be world governments that persecute the church. It has been said that more Christians died for their faith in the 20th century than all the other centuries combined. There sure has been a lot of press about Syrian refugees. But what about all the genocide that is taking place worldwide to exterminate Christians. Not much press there.

Before we look at the place our Shepherd has planned for us, let’s look at the people who will be with us forever. “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.” Joining us before the throne of the Lamb is a large crowd of people that no one could count.

At times it seems that the number of people who believe in Jesus is small compared to the number of people who are living on this earth. Jesus tells us, “Many are called but few are chosen.” He also said, “But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” When you look at all the people who believe in Jesus from the time of Adam and Eve until the present, the number is huge. The Lord told Abraham he would have descendants as numerous as the stars. The Lord was speaking of all the people who believed as Abraham did in a great Descendant who would bless the whole world.

These people come from every nation, tribe, people and language. Our risen Lord has given us the command to preach the gospel to every creature. He tells us to make disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to teach them everything he has commanded us to teach. In some of our WELS connections we see how fellow Christians are reaching people of other countries and other cultures. Oh how we wish that our own congregation included more people of from different nations, tribes, people and languages.

As we look at all these people standing in front of the throne of the Lamb they have two things in common. First of all, they are all wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. When I was a kid, my mom made sure when I went to
church, I looked my very best. I had to make sure I took a shower before church. My hair had to be neatly combed. Plus I always wore a shirt, tie, and sport coat to church. I would never think of wearing shorts to church. My mother made sure I looked the best I could. Today, you can usually tell when my wife is out of town. The pants I wear to church or the tie I put on don’t exactly match right. My shirt might be out in the back. My hair a bit unkempt. My wife is always making sure I look right before I come to church. Lately, she has helped making sure the cross I have around my neck is not twisted. I used to resent her picking on me. Now I know she loves me and wants what’s best for me.

People in this world were born with a terrible obsession that they could dress themselves for church, or to stand in the presence of God. They didn’t need their wives or mothers to give them advice. People felt they could produce their own robe of righteousness, put it on, and stand righteous and looking good in the sight of God. But my friends, we can’t dress ourselves properly before God! Our wardrobe is soiled, with holes under the arms, and filled with sinful sweat.

How foolish it would be for a future bride to take dirty old rags from the garage and sew them together to make a wedding gown for her wedding day. We need God to dress us. And God does. God, The Holy Spirit convinces us that our righteousness is nothing but filthy rags in the sight of our God. The Holy Spirit directs our attention to the righteousness we have in Christ. With the Apostle Paul we say, “That I might be found in him not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.” I am reminded of a picture I once saw of Jesus putting a robe of righteousness on a man who is covered with rags.

A thunderous, loud shout comes forth from this crowd. “And they cried in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” That’s the battle cry of your life and mine. Salvation belongs to God. Our salvation rests in God’s hands and not ours. We like to comfort each other by saying, “It is in the Lord’s hands,” or “You are in the Lord’s hands.” The hands of our Lord were nailed to a cross for our sins. Jesus even kept the nail prints in his hands as the evidence our salvation was completed by him. Your faith also belongs to God. It was given to you by your God as a free gift. Our salvation belongs to God.

The second item these people have in common is that they have come out of the great tribulation. Life on this earth is sooner or later going to be a great tribulation. The Bible says in another place, “We must through many trials and tribulations enter into the kingdom of God.” The world we live in has been messed up because of something called sin. You and I continue to break the commandments that our God has set up. People are mean to each other, hurt each other, are selfish. Many times we suffer because of someone else’s sinfulness. The Bible tells us that our sins have brought something else along with it, disease, sickness, and death. The Bible says that “The wages of sin is death.”

At Open Bible I am amazed at the tribulations of life we face. I talk to a member at Open Bible, they tell me they have 6 weeks of radiation treatments for ovarian cancer or brain cancer. Another member tells me, they have shortness of breath still after having part of their lung removed, or because of bypass surgery. My head spins as I hear one sickness after another. Add to that, the flack we take when we stand up for our
Christian faith. The Greek word for tribulation has the thought of being squeezed. We would say, “Between a rock and hard place.” It is not easy to live your life for Christ. Jesus did not say, “Take up your easy chair and follow me.” He said, “Take up your cross and follow me.” We live each day with the struggle to be the kind of people Jesus wants us to be out of love for all he has done for us. We find ourselves praying for people to come to know Jesus or not give up the precious faith they have in him. The violin needs to have its strings tightened to play beautiful music. The Christian is stretched by Jesus to give glory to him for all his blessings.

We have seen the people. Now let’s look at the place our loving Lord and Shepherd has prepared for us. The humorist Mark Twain once sarcastically quipped that we will suffer in heaven by having to sing one hymn over and over again. How far off this is from the truths about heaven presented to us in this great text of Scripture.

“Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.” We get to be before the throne of God. We get to see him in his temple in all of his glory. He spreads his tent over us. To be in God’s tent is to experience his gracious hospitality forever and ever.

“Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat.” Think of God’s people traveling in the desert to the Promised Land. The sun beat on them. They were thirsty. They were hungry. In heaven all of your needs will be taken care. You will never have to ask yourself, “What am I going to do about this? How will I pay for this? How will I get along with these people?” All the discomforts and unpleasant things of this life will be removed forever. There will be no more hospitals, pharmacies, nursing homes and visits to the doctor.

What will heaven be like? “For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Jesus, the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world will be our Shepherd. The careful shepherd knows where the mountain meadows are lush with grass. He knows where the water is fresh and the large trees are for shade. When the summer heats up and the grass withers and the streams dry up, the shepherd gently takes his sheep up to the mountain heights. He knows where the rich grasses are. He knows where the streams come out of the mountains cold and refreshing. So the Shepherd plans to raise you to life on the last day and give you a glorified body as he has determined. He will take you to the place he has already prepared for you. He says, “I know my sheep and my sheep know me.” He knows what is best for you.

C. S. Lewis writes in the Tales of Narnia “All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page; now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than before.” Every chapter is better than before in the place your Shepherd has planned for you. “When we’ve been there ten thousand years, Bright shining as they sun. We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise, then when we first begun.”

No more tears in heaven. No more worry about terrorists and security. No more broken homes. No more death. There will be no Kleenex in heaven. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Join me then sheep in saying, I am Jesus little lamb, ever glad at heart I am, for my Shepherd gently guides me, knows my need and well provides me, loves me every day the same, even calls me by my name. Amen.